

STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES: WHY YOU SHOULD GO  
AND WHAT YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

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Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Studies

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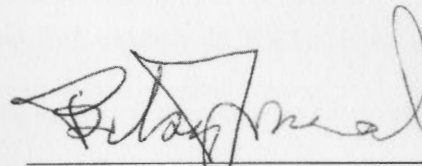
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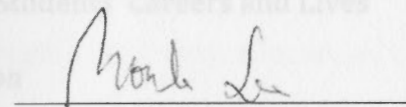
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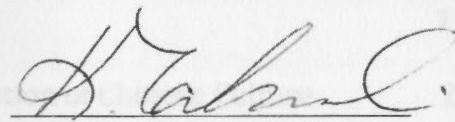
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## Introduction

Recently, a growing number of Chinese parents are choosing to send their children to American colleges. The number of Chinese students going to American graduate schools is also increasing. "Studying in the U.S." is becoming a hot topic in China. When deciding whether to go, parents and students are eager to know how they can benefit from receiving a postsecondary education in the U.S. They may be able to hear various answers from study-abroad agencies – institutions that offer guidance and language-training services to those who want to study abroad. However, most existing answers are superficial and simplistic. In this paper, I will present a more detailed analysis of the benefits and gains that Chinese students can obtain from the experience of studying in the United States.

Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese people highly value educational achievements (Aldwin & Greenberger, 1987). The history of studying in foreign countries started long before the foundation of the People's Republic of China. However, before the Chinese economic reform that started in December 1978, ordinary people found it difficult to receive overseas education. After the reform, studying abroad became common for the Chinese. This profoundly meaningful reform promoted modernization and led to rapid economic growth as well as a profound change in societal views. The changes taking place in China led to an upsurge in the number of Chinese students studying abroad, especially after we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since 2005, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has continued to increase annually. During the five years between 2008 and 2013, the increase was especially obvious, with an annual rate of 15 percent (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Because of the cultural differences between China and the U.S., Chinese international students are likely to experience intense culture shock. The disparities in cultures result in different teaching and learning approaches (Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Chan, 1999). These differences in academic learning pose many challenges for Chinese students. On the other hand, students can achieve some personal growth by managing both the sociocultural and the academic challenges (Kim & Ruben, 1988; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Hao & Wen, 2016).

I interviewed some current and former students and heard their stories of studying and living in the U.S. Some of them are still in America, and some have graduated and are now working in China. When studying in the U.S., all of them encountered culture shock and all sorts of challenges. Scholars (Heikenheimo & Shute, 1986; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Olivas & Li, 2006) have summarized three categories of challenges for Chinese students studying in the U.S.: (1) language barrier, (2) academic challenges, and (3) socio-cultural challenges. In order to survive and succeed in the new environment, the interviewees had to overcome these challenges and undergo an adaptation process. In the painful process of managing their studies and lives, they gradually gained professional knowledge as well as other important qualities and competencies. From the interviewees' experiences, I conclude that although Chinese students many face all sorts of challenges and difficulties when studying in the U.S., they can gradually develop various skills, competencies and qualities in the process of dealing with these challenges. Such personal growth will positively influence their careers and lives in the future.

Although all the interviewees achieved personal growth, the degree of the growth varies. The students' backgrounds and their previous lives in China influence their



adaptation process. The degree of the interviewees' growth mainly depends on the exercise of their own agency. The types of universities and their geographic locations within the U.S. also affect the interviewees' experiences, and thus influence the degree of their personal growth. As a result, I recommend that, in order to attend a school that can academically and socially meet their needs, future students should take the universities' types and locations into account when choosing schools.

In this paper, I first discuss why an increasing number of Chinese students are choosing to study abroad. Then, I compare the differences between Chinese and American education to help readers gain a better understanding of why Chinese students have many academic challenges when studying in the U.S. After summarizing the general benefits and gains that Chinese students can obtain from the experience of studying in the U.S., I use the interviewees' stories to show readers some concrete examples of the students' challenges as well as benefits and personal growth they have gained in the process. In the last section, I use the interviewees' stories to show that the degree of personal growth and benefits depends on students' personal backgrounds and individual determination, as well as the types and geographic locations of the universities in which they enroll. Informing them of the factors affecting the degree of personal growth helps prospective students choose appropriate schools.

### **Motivations for Studying Abroad**

Chinese people have a cultural belief that education can change people's lives. The history of education in China can be dated back to as far as the 16<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In Imperial China, the government used an examination system known as "imperial

examinations” to recruit bureaucrats. It was the main entrance into the ranks of the Emperor’s civil service (Elman, 2009). Scholars spent years preparing for the exam, studying assigned books. Any male adult, regardless of his wealth or social status, could take this exam. Once selected, he would become a high-ranking government official, enter the upper class and completely change his life.

Today in China, education is still regarded as an important avenue to success. However, the current education system faces criticism from experts both at home and abroad. Domestic education has disappointed many Chinese students and parents. As a result, a growing number of them are becoming enthusiastic about taking part in overseas education, hoping to better grow academically and professionally by studying abroad.

### ***Current Higher Education in China***

Psychologists Louise Alexitch and Stewart Page (1996) proposed two generalized types of educational orientation among students: a learning-oriented type and a grade-oriented type. Learning-oriented students are interested in intrinsic values, such as personal growth, the learning process, and intellectual competence. Grade-oriented students embrace extrinsic values and are more concerned about grades, status, competition and recognition. Influenced by the imperial examination system in history, Chinese students often overemphasize test scores and fall into the grade-oriented type. China’s national college entrance examination, commonly known as *Gaokao*, further enhances students’ grade-oriented perspective. *Gaokao* determines whether students can attend college and the kinds of schools in which they can enroll. Getting a high score in *Gaokao* to attend top-ranking universities is most students’ ultimate goal. Obsession with



test scores undermines students' creativity, practical ability, and independent learning ability. Under the pressure of *Gaokao*, studying is turned into a process of memorization and rote learning.

A shortage of good domestic educational opportunities is one cause of *Gaokao*'s rigorousness as well as the main reason for students to choose overseas education. There are more than 2529 universities and colleges across China (Ministry of Education of China, 2015). But these schools' reputation and comprehensive strength are extremely unbalanced. Only 39 universities sponsored by the 985 Project – a project intending to promote the development and reputation of China's higher education – are considered to be “worth attending” (Ministry of Education of China, 2015). It is difficult for graduates from non-985 schools to have a “bright” future. Under this circumstance, some students turn to educational opportunities in other countries to meet their educational needs.

Even top-ranking universities in China may fail to provide students with their expected academic and professional growth. Experts criticize China's university system for being unfit for a modern economy. Under the current university system, students who have the best memory and ability to conform to the system succeed. They are taught to take orders and be micromanaged. They lack independence and critical-thinking abilities, upon which modern society depends for future growth (Waldmeir, 2014).

Both Chinese educators and the government have been aware of the necessity of educational reform in China. They are making efforts to reduce the emphasis on test scores. Some esteemed universities, such as Peking University, have launched creative programs, hoping to provide students with a more critical and flexible education. However, because China's universities are state-run, they are overly bureaucratic and

have no autonomy. Under bureaucratic control, despite the efforts to reform the university system, very limited progress has been made. As a result, students and parents are disappointed with domestic education and higher education in China fails to meet some students' academic demands. In order to receive a better education and to escape from the rigorous college entrance examination, an increasing number of Chinese students choose to study abroad.

### ***Motivations for Choosing the U.S. as Destination Country***

Data from the Chinese Ministry of Education (2015) show that, among all Chinese students abroad, 60 percent are in the United States. Chinese students choosing the U.S. as their destination country are motivated by several factors. In her research on Chinese students' motivations for studying abroad, Jessica Griner (2014), an international student at Zhejiang University, found that Western influence in China plays a large role in affecting students' decisions. For Chinese students, this Western influence mainly comes from the U.S. As mentioned above, the reform and opening up in 1978 served as a turning point in China's history. Formal diplomatic relations between China and the U.S. were built during that period. Since then, communication between the two countries has become frequent. It provided young Chinese people with access to American culture. The image of the U.S. is delivered to Chinese students via various means such as movies, music and food. Chinese students are also familiar with American brands. In addition, English, as a world language, is a required subject at school. Learning the language provides Chinese students an avenue for learning about various aspects of the country. Thus, when considering the destination country, many students choose the U.S. because



they have already been attracted by America's culture and would like to develop a further and deeper understanding of this country.

Because of the country's global influence, degrees from American universities are more recognized in China than other foreign degrees. Employers in China overemphasize credentials in the recruitment process, and so finding a good job is easier for students with American degrees than those having other countries' or domestic degrees. All the interviewees in this paper who returned to China with an American degree now have a successful career. With the intention of gaining a competitive degree and finding a good job, many Chinese students choose the U.S. as their destination country.

In addition to a competitive degree, the excellent postsecondary education in the U.S. is another factor for Chinese students choosing to study in the U.S. American universities have advanced teaching and research facilities as well as many internationally acclaimed scholars. Studying in such an academic environment, Chinese students expect that they can achieve greater academic growth than studying in other countries. They believe that studying in the U.S. can equip them with necessary competencies that are helpful for their future careers. Some employers said that employees with American educational backgrounds are stronger and more competitive than those returning from other countries and regions like Australia and Europe (Hao & Wen, 2016). Returnees from the U.S. are important sources for China's human-resource development (Welch & Hao, 2013). They have positively affected China's globalization process, and they are also sources of innovation in various fields, such as education, technology and scientific research (Wang, 2011).

## **Comparison between Chinese and American Education**

The disparities between Chinese and American education are a popular research topic. Differences in culture are major determinants of the educational differences between China and the U.S. The learning shock that Chinese students experience is essentially culture shock (Gu, 2009). Culture influences people's thinking and behavioral patterns. It also helps to shape teaching and learning approaches (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Roger Tweed and Darrin Lehman, two psychologists from Kwantlen Polytechnic University and University of British Columbia, proposed a Confucian-Socratic framework to discuss the differences between Eastern and Western education. Their framework can be used to analyze the differences between Chinese and American education. Confucianism helps to shape Chinese learning and teaching approaches (Chan, 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Gieve & Clark, 2005), while, on the other hand, American approaches are culturally Western and Socratic-influenced (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

### ***Different Learning Approaches***

Confucius was a famous educator and philosopher in ancient China. His students recorded his ideas, including those on teaching and learning, in *The Analects of Confucius*. All Chinese students learn it at school. It is regarded as the Chinese *Bible* and plays an important role in shaping Chinese people's beliefs and values as well as approaches to teaching and learning (Fu, 2010).

Confucius highly valued a vast store of essential knowledge and regarded it as the foundation of further learning (Confucius, 1979). In ancient and imperial China, *The*



*Four Books and Five Classics* were the essentials. Anyone who intended to take the imperial examinations would have to spend years studying these books (Elman, 2009). Although the imperial examination system is gone, Chinese students today are still required to learn selected chapters from *The Four Books and Five Classics*, as well as other classical writings. They learn the classics mainly by memorization (Yee, 1989; Valiente, 2008). Schools in China have a “morning recitation time” that is usually a one-hour period before the first class for memorization and recitation. Memorizing the classics is a crucial part of Chinese education. In order to test whether students have memorized required texts, teachers regularly ask students to write the texts from memory, and students must write the texts verbatim.

Because of such learning methods that emphasize memorization, people in the West negatively perceive Chinese learning methods as passive rote learning (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Recently, some scholars have realized that this is a misunderstanding since Chinese students often use memorization as a path to understanding instead of merely memorizing the materials, and thus we should not equate it with rote learning (Lee, 1996; Chan, 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Valiente, 2008). Although memorization has some positive aspects, and memorizing classics helps to transmit cultural heritage to the next generation, learning by relying on memorization does hinder students’ creativity as well as their theoretical and logical reasoning (Chan, 1999).

Confucius also argued that observing and learning from models was an effective learning method. He advocated respectful learning, identifying teachers as virtuous models with essential knowledge and advocating people to respect and learn from them (Confucius, 1979). Influenced by Confucianism, students in China are socialized to



respect knowledge and teachers. They treat textbooks and teachers as authoritative sources of knowledge and rarely challenge them. With such passive attitudes, Chinese students are criticized as lacking critical-thinking ability (Chan, 1999).

In contrast with Confucius' emphasis on learning the essentials, Socrates highly valued self-generated knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). He encouraged individuals to find out the truth by themselves. Different from Confucius' approaches of learning from models, Socrates learned by frequently questioning others' and his own beliefs (*The Apology*). Influenced by Socratic methods, American students, unlike Chinese students who regard the texts and teachers as authoritative sources of knowledge, use questioning and evaluating as important tools in the learning process and tend to doubt and evaluate sources. They also have a disposition to express personal hypotheses and emphasize students' individual autonomy (Weber, 1946; Liberman, 1994; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Such learning approaches are also consistent with the American culture of individualism, thus supporting the belief that cultures strongly influence learning approaches. Because of their respective characteristics, American learning styles are associated with active learning while Chinese learning styles are regarded as passive (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

### ***Different Teaching Approaches***

China and America also have completely different teaching approaches because of Confucius' and Socrates' different perspectives on the roles of teachers. Confucius believed that teachers are responsible for transferring knowledge to students. Teachers' guidance is important to students and acquiring knowledge from authorities is far more effective than students looking for it by themselves (Confucius, 1979; Tweed & Lehman,



2002). Teachers in China are expected to have deep knowledge and to know how to transmit this knowledge. They are expected to help students lay a solid foundation by teaching students essential knowledge. As a result, they tend to use a spoon-feeding teaching style to “give” and “dispense” knowledge to students (Wan, 1999; Huang, 2009; Hing Wa Sit, 2013). In Chinese universities, the instructors guide the students to learn, giving students strict directions and telling them how to proceed step by step to achieve the academic goals. As a result, Chinese students are criticized as lacking initiative and autonomy in study.

On the other hand, Socrates embraced a different teaching approach. He believed that individuals have the ability to find truth by themselves if they are inspired by the right questions (Plato, 1956; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). With such cultural influence, in American universities, teachers are “stimulators” (Huang, 2009). They encourage students to think independently instead of just “giving” them knowledge or telling them how to proceed step by step. They give students a lot of freedom to complete academic tasks. For American students, just like sociologist Max Weber (1946, p.149) said, “no young American would like to have the teacher sell him a *Weltanschauung* or a code of conduct.” They are reluctant to be directed by their professors (Lieberman, 1994) and feel a great need for self-direction in academic tasks (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

### ***Different Classroom Environments***

Different learning and teaching approaches lead to different classroom environments. In China, teachers are regarded as transmitters of knowledge. Students are expected to “receive” knowledge and respect teachers. Listening quietly is a means to

show respect, while challenging teachers is regarded as rude and disrespectful. Thus, Chinese classrooms are quiet. Teachers use lectures and demonstrations to deliver knowledge. Students listen quietly, rarely questioning or expressing their own opinions.

The self-effacement in Chinese culture is another reason for students' tendency to withhold their opinions in class (Chan, 1999; Yan & Berliner, 2009). Confucius highly valued modest behaviors and thought that people can make greater progress if they hold a modest attitude when they learn (Confucius, 1979). With the intention to be modest, Chinese students tend to withhold their questions and opinions in class to avoid embarrassing or offending others.

However, things are different in American classrooms. American students do not have to consider whether it is appropriate to question or express their own ideas in class. They rely on questioning and discussions as means to obtain knowledge and are eager to express their own ideas. As a result, in American universities, the classroom is learner-centered, and interactions between students and instructors are common.

According to Tweed and Lehman (2002), the learning and teaching approaches proposed by Confucius and Socrates markedly contrast with each other and account for disparities between Chinese and American education. When faced with an academic environment that is alien to them, Chinese students are likely to encounter "learning shock" (Gu, 2009). In later sections, I use interviewees' experiences to show some concrete examples of the different styles of Chinese and American education as well as examples of academic challenges that the interviewees encountered.

Despite the challenges, the interviewees later embraced the interactive teaching and learning approaches in U.S. colleges. Chinese and American education contrast with



each other, but they are also complementary to each other. Being exposed to a Socratic-oriented academic environment, Chinese students are able to make up for what they could not learn in China. Adopting Confucius' learning approaches, Chinese students are more concrete and pragmatic in evaluating ideas than American students. But they may lack creativity and problem-solving abilities and are less likely to explore new methods to solve problems (Chan, 1999). The interviewees' experiences show how American education helps to make up for these disadvantages and fosters the interviewees' independence and critical-thinking abilities. These competencies give the interviewees an upper hand in the job market after they return to China.

### **Influences of Studying in the U.S. on Chinese Students' Careers and Lives**

The job market in China is becoming increasingly competitive. In 1999, the Chinese government expanded higher-education enrollment across the country. Due to this policy, a growing number of college graduates are flooding into China's labor market (Hao, 2016). In 2015, the total number of graduates reached 7,490,000. This is 220,000 more than the previous year (MyCOS, 2015). Employers, in order to survive in the increasingly competitive market, are more eager to find employees with practical skills and strong capabilities. Studying in the U.S. can give Chinese students the abilities that employers expect and give them an advantage over other candidates. In addition to these abilities, Chinese students can also obtain degrees from American universities, which is powerful evidence of a candidate's qualification for Chinese employers.

### *The Power of an International Qualification*

Michael Spence is an American economist who received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001. He proposed a job-market signaling model and argued that employers rely on certain indicators to predict the applicant's capacity during the interview process. They believe that educational credentials are positively related with having greater ability, and so they use credentials as an important indicator to select competent workers. Thus, when looking for a job, potential employees use their education credentials as a signal to convey information about their ability to employers (Spence, 1973).

As noted above, in China's job market, employers overemphasize credentials in the recruitment process. Just like the Chinese proverb that monks from elsewhere are better at chanting scriptures, they have a superstition that students educated overseas are more capable than those receiving a domestic education. Because of America's global influence, a credential from an American university works as a strong signal that tells the employers that the applicants have greater abilities. As a result, employers have a predisposition to give priority to those with educational certificates from American universities. Some employers even clarify in the recruitment information that they will only consider those with overseas educational backgrounds. All the interviewees in this paper who are now working in China said that their qualifications were the keys to the interviewers' doors. Without these qualifications, they would not have been invited to interviews, let alone get the job. This superstition is now facing criticism, but an American degree is still valued by many employers and helps returnees get a foot in an employer's door.



Although an upgraded qualification can bring about employment opportunities when students return to China, after they start the job, what matters is their professional skills and working abilities. Previous investigations conducted by some researchers have shown that the abilities required in the workplace can be obtained from the education they received in the U.S.

### ***Professional Knowledge and Skills***

The experiences of studying in America contribute to the professional development of Chinese students who return to work in China. As a powerful developed country, the US is at the cutting edge of many fields. Studying in American universities, students are able to develop their subject knowledge, skills and expertise, all of which they can use in the workplace after returning to China. By putting to use the knowledge they acquired in America, many of the returnees are able to become experts and leaders in their fields, especially in science, engineering, and technology.

Students can also obtain linguistic competency from their experiences of studying in America. Because of economic development and globalization, China now has frequent contact with the outside world. Communicating with people from foreign countries is now common in the Chinese workplace. As a result, English is becoming increasingly important because of its global dominance. The interviewees' experience shows that several years of studying and living in America enabled them to develop a good command of English, which increases their employability, especially in multinational companies.

There are also abilities that Chinese students can obtain from the “learning shocks.” The different approaches to academic learning between China and America have been analyzed above by using Tweed and Lehman’s Confucian-Socratic framework. Because of such differences, when exposed to the American academic environment for the first time, many Chinese students feel uncomfortable. Some scholars (Yan & Berliner, 2009, Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010) have studied Chinese students’ academic struggles as well as achievements in American schools. Their research and the interviewees’ experience indicate that, although the adaptation process is painful, students can achieve substantial personal growth and obtain essential qualities in the adaptation process, which gives them an upper hand in the workplace after returning to China.

The autonomy expected from students in U.S. higher education gives students independent learning abilities. A human resources director of a multinational company indicates that employees with Western education backgrounds generally have strong learning abilities and imbibe new things quickly, which are big advantages in the Chinese workplace (Hao, 2016). Academic pressure in American schools also leads to Chinese students’ better time management and self-planning skills. These skills contribute to their enhanced efficacy in the workplace. Finally, having experienced academic anxiety in America, the students know how to work under pressure and are able to keep a positive and optimistic attitude toward work (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). In the process of adaptation, Chinese students become aware of American learning and teaching approaches, and, through these experiences, they gradually come to possess the skills, strength and personal characteristics that enable them perform well in their work after returning to China (Gu, 2009).



### ***“Soft Skills” and Personal Development***

In addition to the aforementioned professional knowledge and skills obtained from academic study, Chinese students can also acquire some “soft skills” through the experience of studying in America.

Gu (2015) analyzes Chinese students’ overseas experiences through the conceptual lens of transnationalism. She labels Chinese international students as transnational individuals. Transnational individuals experience “diaspora consciousness” so that they have “dual or multiple identities” (Vertovec, 2009). Chinese international students live in two countries and need to move between China and America. They are able to experience two different types of lives (Gu, 2015). Such intercultural experience enables them to have diaspora consciousness – a sense of being at home in more than one place, a sense of more than one national and cultural identity, and awareness of “here” and “there” (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

For Chinese students studying in the US, “here” means China and “there” indicates America. In students’ transnational experience in America, their Chinese roots encounter the newly learnt American culture. Exposure to a foreign culture is likely to give a person new perspectives on his own culture (Watson & Lippitt, 1958). The recognition of how our own culture has shaped us as well as the way we behave is indeed the greatest shock in an encounter with a different culture (Heusinkvelt, 1997). When in America, students are exposed to different ways of studying, living and thinking. When faced with American culture that is alien to them, Chinese students are increasingly able to notice cultural differences between the two countries. The differences impel them to re-evaluate their own cultural traditions and values. As a result, they are able to learn

more about their cultural roots. That is why students, after studying in America, find that they are more knowledgeable about their own Chinese backgrounds and are more appreciative of their home culture than before and than those without intercultural experiences.

Chinese students can also learn about American as well as other nations' cultures through studying and living in the U.S. The U.S., as an immigrant country, includes people from many different cultural backgrounds. Studying in such a multicultural environment, Chinese students can meet international students from all over the world and interact with people from different countries. This unique experience brings them into contact with different values, norms and cultures. In order to manage successful academic cooperation with foreign students, Chinese students have to learn to understand other cultures instead of sticking to their own values and norms (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). In this way, they learn to accept other possibilities and develop an openness to diversity.

Chinese students' interaction with "there" also helps to develop "cosmopolitan competence" (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015), which positively influences their future career. Cosmopolitan competence is manifested through various aspects. Many Chinese students are able to have a broadened worldview and a profound change in thinking patterns after several years of studying and living in America. Many case studies (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Wang, Zweig & Lin, 2011; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Hao and Wen, 2016) have shown that students with intercultural experiences have a more flexible thinking pattern. They have learnt to analyze a problem from different perspectives and usually more comprehensively.



Another manifestation of cosmopolitan competence is a kind of intercultural empathy (Gu & Schweisfurth 2015), a quality that contributes to communication skills. To communicate effectively with people from foreign countries is not merely a question of language ability. What matters more is whether we know their culture, their values, norms, behaviors and thinking patterns. America, unlike China's mono-cultural environment, gives Chinese students the opportunity to meet people from various cultural backgrounds. Studying and living in America, Chinese students encounter cultural shock. In the collision of their own culture with foreign cultures, they gradually learn how to deal with cultural difference, and the process of overcoming cultural shock helps to develop their intercultural empathy. This quality enables them to communicate more effectively with people from foreign countries. After returning to China, students with the quality of intercultural empathy as well as a good command of English are highly sought after by employers of multinational companies and joint Sino-foreign capital ventures.

Chinese students can also gain a broadened social network from the experiences of studying in America. The network of friends plays an important role in people's career and life, especially in China where there is an emphasis on *Guanxi*. *Guanxi* is a Chinese term referring to personalized social networks. Chinese society is collectivist-oriented, and relationships with others strongly influence many aspects of an individual's life (Niu, 2013), including his career. *Guanxi* is identified as one of the most important factors for a successful career in China (Yeung & Tung, 1996; Abramson & Ai, 1999). It is also regarded as a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Tsang, 1998; Fork & Woo, 1998). When studying in America, Chinese students have the opportunity to make friends with not only other Chinese students, but also students from other countries. After

returning to China, they can build a range of networks with those who have similar experiences such as those who used to study in the same American university, those who also have the experience of studying in America, and even those who have any intercultural experiences. Some interviewees in this paper have built successful networks both in America and China. In the later sections of this paper, their experiences will show how these networks have positively influenced their careers and lives.

To summarize, when studying in America, Chinese students are able to learn competitive professional knowledge and skills. They can also develop better time-management and self-planning skills and have a good command of English as well as improved communication skills more generally. Exposure to a multicultural environment enables Chinese students to develop cosmopolitan competence. Thus, they have a broadened worldview, a better understanding of other cultures, and openness to diversity. The difficulties and challenges they encounter in America also enable them to have the qualities of self-confidence and optimism. Chinese students also gain an expanded social network through their studying-in-America experience. These personal developments positively influence their career and life in the future.

Chinese students obtain the aforementioned competencies and qualities mainly from their adaptation process of conquering difficulties and challenges. Scholars (Heikenheimo & Shute, 1986; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Olivas & Li, 2006) have identified three general categories of challenges: (1) language barrier, (2) academic challenges, and (3) socio-cultural challenges. In following sections, I use the interviewees' experiences to show some concrete examples of these challenges. According to the interviewees' experiences, in addition to the competencies and qualities, most of them



found that they also gained a better understanding and deeper appreciation of their own culture. I first discuss the interviewees' better understanding of their home culture, and then respectively discuss the three challenges, mainly from four perspectives: (1) What are the challenges? (2) Why do such challenges exist? (3) How do Chinese students overcome them? (4) What can they learn and obtain in the process? And how can the adaptation process positively influence their future? I hope to help prospective students make decisions by informing them of the possible difficulties, offering some practical suggestions, and showing them what they may be able to obtain if they choose to study abroad in the U.S.

### **A Better Understanding and Deeper Appreciation of Chinese Culture**

Peter S. Adler (1975, p. 20), Orientation and Counseling Officer at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii, said that all persons are "products of the culture in which they have lived." Chinese students studying in U.S. higher educational institutions all grew up in China. They, especially those who finished their undergraduate education in China and are now studying in American graduate schools, are deeply influenced by Chinese culture. Who they are now is the result of their living experience in China. Their behaviors and values are shaped by Chinese culture.

Although culture does have profound influence on people's values and behaviors, most individuals are relatively unaware of this (Adler, 1975). Few of us would like to reflect on what has shaped our attitudes or why we are used to behaving in certain ways. We just take everything for granted and rarely self reflect. This is to some extent like our command of our native language. We use our native language to communicate, but few



of us, except those taking on special professions, think about why we use the expression A instead of B on certain occasions. We just believe it is natural to use it but do not care about why.

It is after being exposed to the American cultural environment that the Chinese students begin to reflect on their own culture. When studying and living in America, they encounter a series of new behaviors, values and attitudes that conflict with their own. Their cultural understanding can no longer explain their experiences in the new environment. In this situation, there emerges an increasing sense of being different. Nearly all the interviewees admitted that, after arriving, they did feel a sense of difference between them and the Americans around them.

Cheng used to be a graduate student at Syracuse University in New York. When asked about the differences that she noticed between Chinese and American culture, she replied that:

There are too many differences that I can even write a book on this topic. First, we use different languages. We eat different foods by using different utensils. Talking about the eating utensils, it reminds me of one interesting experience. The first time that I had lunch with one of my American friends, she was extremely interested in the pair of chopsticks that I used to eat and asked me to teach her how to use that. It was really an interesting cross-cultural experience for me. To continue with the list of differences, we also celebrate different festivals, like different forms of recreation, and have different attitudes towards the same topic.

Cheng's list continues. Most of the differences she mentioned are superficial. Even those in China might be able to notice them. When asked for some examples of differences in values or beliefs that are shaped by culture, Cheng replied:

Chinese people highly value the quality of humility. As a Chinese, I take a humble attitude in both studying and living. However, in America, the Chinese style of humility sometimes poses an obstacle to communication. I still remember the first time that an American friend said to me, "You have a beautiful coat." I immediately replied that, "No no, it's not beautiful. It's ordinary and not worthy of your praise." You know this is a standard Chinese-style reply to praise. However, it didn't work the same way in America. Even today, I can still remember my friend's



embarrassment and discomfort. After that, I gradually learnt to say "Thank you" to those who praised me. For me, the different attitude to humility is one of the most impressive cultural differences between China and America.

Some interviewees noticed differences in interpersonal relationships. As Jiang, a graduate student at University of Notre Dame, said:

I was taught how to behave properly in front of my teachers and the elders as early as I was in kindergarten. However, in America, personal relationship is more informal. Students can call their professors' first names, and this absolutely cannot happen in Chinese universities. I feel very uncomfortable to call my professor's first name and think of it as rude and disrespectful.

From the habits in daily life to the differing attitudes towards norms and values such as humility and interpersonal relationships, Chinese students can feel the shock caused by cultural differences. Examples of students' sense of differences can go on and on – as Cheng said, it could be written into a book. Then, how has the experience of being exposed to a different cultural environment influenced them? The majority of the interviewees said it gave them a chance to gain a better understanding of their own culture.

Some said that the better understanding is triggered by their awareness of differences. The more they feel being different from others, the more eager they are to know more about their roots. Shi, a doctoral student majoring in mathematics at Princeton University, said that studying in America not only gives him an opportunity to know other cultures but also encourages him to learn more about the Chinese language:

I think China and America are so different two countries that they are sharply contrasted with each other. One obvious difference is the language. Chinese characters and English letters are said to be opponents. When I was in China, I spoke Chinese so naturally that I rarely reflect on the language I used every day. However, now in an English-speaking environment, everything in the Chinese language that I used to neglect becomes so intensive that I am having a growing interest in it. I began to learn Chinese calligraphy, write poems and read classical Chinese literature. As a student who majored in math, I never did these when in China. Sometimes late at night, I speak Chinese to myself in the mirror. Now I think that Chinese is the



most beautiful language in the world. By the means of language, I feel a connection to China and to my roots. It comforts me.

The growing interest in Chinese language has brought Shi some achievement. Last year, he took part in the 2015 Global Competition of Chinese Short Poem organized by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and his poem "The Slab-Stone Street in My Hometown" won second prize. Shi's other poems, like, "To My Grandfather," "We Have Never Seen the Far Future," and "Standing at the Corner of the Street," were published in Chinese magazines like *Duzhe* and *Life*: both are among the most widely circulated magazines in Mainland China. Shi said that his experience of standing at the intersection of Chinese and American cultures is the source of his inspiration. If he were still in China, in a monocultural environment, he might not be able to create these poems.

Some interviewees think that it is studying and living in a multicultural environment that enables them to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture. Studying in American universities, Chinese students are a minority group. Not only are they themselves aware that they are distinct from Americans, the American students also notice the differences. It is natural for humans to pay more attention to those who are different. As a result of the focus on the differences, some American students become interested in learning about Chinese culture or are just curious about the East that is far away from their world. In either situation, their willingness to learn something about China encourages Chinese students to introduce and explain Chinese culture to them. Thus, communication on cultural issues is common in American universities.

All the interviewees said that they used to discuss cultural issues with their American friends. They regard it as an effective method to disseminate Chinese culture as well as to eliminate stereotypes and misunderstandings. They think that such



communication also facilitates their understanding of their own culture. In order to accurately convey as much information to their American friends as possible, Chinese students may have to gather information from different sources such as books and the Internet. For them, the process of information collection is also a process of learning. They are able to learn what they neglected when in China and gain a deeper understanding of some cultural issues.

Anny has taken part in the Chinese Spring Festival Gala at the University of Notre Dame twice. For Chinese students at the University of Notre Dame, the Chinese Spring Festival Gala is the most important annual event that takes place at the beginning of each year. It is also a good chance for American students to learn about Chinese culture. In 2015, Anny was the director and, then, for this year's gala, she worked as the gala host. When asked about her experience with the events, she said:

Our gala here is different from those in China. Most programs are 'Chinese style' or marked by many Chinese elements, but Spring Festival galas held in Chinese universities usually have relatively 'neutral' programs, and they are unlikely to deliberately arrange programs that have distinct Chinese characteristics. Here, we are in a different situation. Some of our audiences are Americans, and we want to show them Chinese culture. Thus Chinese traditional dress, like *Hanfu* and *cheongsam*, Chinese musical instruments, like *pipa* and Chinese zither, often appear on the stage. When preparing for the event, our group needs to gather information, and as a result we are able to learn more about Chinese traditional dress, its history, and something about Chinese musical instruments.

For some Chinese students, the chance to learn about their own culture also comes from academic learning. Studying in universities with a multicultural environment, Chinese students have many opportunities to present their culture in class. I used to experience such in-class cultural communication myself.

In a humanities seminar on translation, I was invited by my instructor to do a presentation on Chinese characters. When preparing for the presentation, I spent more



than two weeks reading papers and collecting information. The presentation turned out to be successful. My audience was satisfied with what they had learnt, and I was able to know Chinese characters better. When in China, I rarely pay attention to the characters that I use every day. In Chinese universities, instructors, aside from those teaching special subjects such as Chinese language, are unlikely to ask students to do a presentation on such a topic. In China, with a monoculture environment, we rarely focus on what we have in common. But, here in America, because of the multicultural nature of American universities, we are given the chance to reflect on what we have neglected before and thus have opportunities to gain a better understanding of our own culture.

Some interviewees' increasing appreciation of Chinese culture is triggered by an emotion of nostalgia. Here in America, in an unfamiliar environment, Chinese students sometimes will have a sense of alienation and frustration. When attacked by such negative emotions, some of them turn to what they are familiar with to seek comfort and a sense of safety. Shi said that he would read Chinese classical literature like *The Analects of Confucius* and *Three Hundred Tang Poems* to reduce negative emotions. Some interviewees said that, after coming to the US, they began to celebrate the Spring Festival although they did not do so when in China. Cheng said:

When I was in China, on Chinese New Year, I rarely celebrate it in the traditional way. My parents did the traditional ritual such as pasting Spring Festival couplets and preparing traditional festival dinner. But after arriving in America, I began to celebrate Chinese New Year. I buy red paper from local Chinese market, write the couplets by myself and paste them on the doorways. I also cook *Niangao* [Chinese New Year's cake]. This alleviates my homesickness. By celebrating the festival, I also become more appreciative of traditional Chinese culture.

Some people think that Chinese with overseas educational experience are "westernized" Chinese who are alienated from their home culture. However, the experiences of the interviewees prove that to be a stereotype. It is true that, recently, the



younger Chinese generation has been strongly influenced by western culture. In China, it is common for young people to celebrate western festivals such as Christmas and Valentine's Day. On the other hand, fewer young people are interested in traditional Chinese festivals, and it is usually the elders that try to maintain the tradition. Young people also watch a lot of American movies and TV dramas, but they do not read as much Chinese classical literature as before. Some Chinese scholars criticize this phenomenon as "forgetting one's roots." On the other hand, it is interesting that Chinese young people become more appreciative of their own culture after going to America. They are more enthusiastic and have more chances to learn Chinese culture when studying in America. No matter what enables them to learn more, most of them are able to gain a deeper understanding of their home culture through the experience of studying in America. However this change might influence their future, a better understanding of one's own culture can never be a bad thing.

Acquiring a deeper understanding of Chinese culture is only one of the various changes and areas of personal growth that Chinese students experience when studying in America. They can benefit and learn more in the process of overcoming the challenges caused by the language barrier, academic learning, and socio-cultural adjustment.

### **Growing by Overcoming Language Challenges**

Because of the important role of English in facilitating globalization, English is a mandatory subject in Chinese middle schools and high schools. Before attending American colleges, Chinese high-school graduates have studied English for more than six years. For those attending graduate schools, it is more than ten years. However, long-term

study does not always bring about good results. All the interviewees admitted that, after coming to America, they encountered language problems, especially in the first academic year. Chinese students' language challenges are mainly caused by two problems in China's English education.

The first one is the test-oriented teaching and learning methods. Chinese students are assessed by standardized tests. The English score accounts for one-third of the entire score on the college-entrance examination. Thus Chinese students learn English by rote learning and memorization, just as they learn other subjects. They memorize set phrases and recite model writings in order to get high scores in exams. They also spend a large amount of time learning grammar but do not pay enough attention to the communication that is a vital aspect of language acquisition. With very limited chance to practice oral English or do listening exercises, most students can only acquire "dumb and deaf English." They might be able to read or write well in English, but, when it comes to communication, they can hardly understand native speakers. Neither can they clearly express themselves.

The second problem is the disjuncture between authentic English and the English taught in China. Some interviewees pointed out that, after coming to America, they found that they had learned the "wrong" English in China. Native speakers do not use the same expressions that they learned at home. Here is one example: "How are you?" "I'm fine. Thank you. And you?" This is what most Chinese students learn in their first English class. However, after coming to America, they find few native speakers actually talk like that. Cheng said, "It took me more than three months to start saying 'good' instead of 'I'm fine. Thank you. And you?'" In addition to the "wrong" English, Chinese students



also learn a lot of “useless” English. What they have learned cannot help them in daily situations in an English-speaking country. Chinese students learn how to use English to “introduce the city where you live,” to “introduce a film to your friends,” or to “borrow books in a library,” But, after coming to America, they find that they have learned little to help them in daily situations. They cannot communicate appropriately when opening bank accounts, renting an apartment, or buying a car.

These two factors work together and make language the first difficulty that most Chinese students encounter upon arriving. They cannot understand others; neither can they express themselves clearly. Even those like Cheng with high TOEFL or GRE scores face the same problem. Cheng decided to attend American graduate schools in her freshman year and, so, during her four years of college life, she devoted all her spare time to preparing for TOEFL and GRE. Her hard work paid off, and she was admitted by Syracuse University. However, despite these efforts, Cheng still faced language problems in the first semester. She said:

Reciting set phrases does not help much. I would encounter unfamiliar expressions every day. For example, when I was ready to pay for my first shopping, the cashier asked, “Are you all set?” I didn’t know what that meant until I looked it up in the dictionary after arriving home. Language also hindered my academic learning. I still remember my first class. I could only understand my professor less than 20% of the time. He talked much faster than what I heard when doing listening exercises in China. It was really frustrating.

Other interviewees also had similar experiences. In the first a few months, they could hardly understand their instructors or classmates. They could not express their ideas either. Most of the time, they had to keep silent in class. Language problems negatively affected their academic learning.

Although all the interviewees encountered language challenges, for most of them, it got better after the first one or two semesters. Conquering the language barrier is the

having studied in America because she would be able to have much higher pay if she had an American educational background and a good command of English.

On the other hand, those with American educational backgrounds can take advantage of their linguistic competencies and win out in the job market. Wan, now working in Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ (China) Suzhou Branch, studied at University of Indianapolis for two years as an international exchange student. She shared with me her experience of getting her current job:

At the last round of the interview, only a girl who graduated from Suzhou University and me were left. I thought both of us were qualified, but I finally beat my competitor because my English is better than hers. Although Mitsubishi is a Japanese bank, English, as a global language, is still highly valued here. So is the case in other international companies and organizations.

In addition to linguistic competence, students also gain self-confidence by overcoming language challenges. As Wu said, she clearly saw the whole process of her progress. At first, she could not even understand what others were saying. Now she can communicate in English without much difficulty. As a result, she felt a strong sense of success. She explained, "This gave me confidence to overcome other challenges in my study".

In a word, because Chinese students are not well prepared linguistically while in China, after arriving in America, the language challenge is the first difficulty that they are aware of. They must conquer this challenge if they want to have a meaningful and successful study-abroad experience. By overcoming language challenges, they are able to acquire linguistic competencies that enable them to be more competitive in the job market after graduation. Students can also gain self-confidence when they are making progress in English, which also positively influences many aspects of their lives.



## **Growing by Overcoming Academic Challenges**

I have discussed the disparities between Chinese and American education in previous sections. The differences in teaching and learning approaches are the main causes of learning shock – the unpleasant feelings and difficult experiences that Chinese students encounter when they are faced with an American academic environment that is alien to them (Gu, 2009). All of the interviewees were able to notice some differences in education immediately after they began their studies. There are three common differences that all the interviewees experienced: the classroom environment, the role of the instructors, and the assessment methods.

The first difference is the classroom environment. After coming to America, all of the interviewees experienced a different classroom environment. They think that the American classroom environment is much more casual. One interviewee told me that she was astonished when for the first time she saw American students eating snacks in class. In China, this behavior is considered disrespectful. But, in America, it is acceptable. Sometimes the instructors will also bring food to class and share it with the students. Thus, many interviewees described the American classroom environment as relaxed.

The casual classroom environment is also reflected in the frequent interactions between the instructors and students. The interviewees said that their American classmates like to ask questions at any time during class and the instructors welcome such behaviors. When the instructors raise a question, American students always actively express their opinions even without being invited to speak. In addition, group discussion is also common in American classrooms. However, in China, the instructors rarely use in-class discussions as a teaching method. Instead, they use lectures and demonstrations to

teach while students listen quietly and take notes. In class, interrupting the teachers or speaking out without being invited to do so is regarded as rude and disrespectful.

All the interviewees said that they felt uncomfortable when exposed to the new classroom environment. Huang is a graduate student majoring in public affairs at Indiana University South Bend. She expressed feelings that were shared by the majority of the interviewees:

I'm not accustomed to express myself overtly or interrupt the teachers in class. Instead, I prefer asking the instructors after class if I have questions. I also felt it difficult to join the in-class or group discussions. This is partly because I'm not confident with my English. Most of the time, I just sit quietly and listen to the others. I feel that I am an outsider and alienated from the class.

The second difference that all the interviewees mentioned is the role of instructors. Qi used to be a graduate student majoring in accounting at Loyola University in Chicago. She said that, during her four years of undergraduate education in China, she would take a lot of notes in each class while listening to the instructors' lectures. However, after entering American graduate school, in the first a few months, she felt that she could learn very limited things in class because the instructors did not "deliver" much knowledge to the students like the Chinese instructors did.

Doctoral students are more likely to notice such a difference. Wang is a doctoral student majoring in Chemistry at University of Notre Dame. He said that his professor rarely gives him detailed instructions or tells him how to proceed step by step to achieve academic goals. Instead, he only provides general directions or suggestions on Wang's proposals. What projects he would do or how to arrange the experiment are all determined by Wang himself. His professor always tells him that people are responsible for their own projects as well as their own academic development. At first, Wang was not accustomed to such self-direction in academic tasks and felt lost during the first semester.



The interviewees also experienced different assessment methods. They said that, while in China, their academic performance was mainly measured by exams and it was usually the final exams that matter most. Qi said that, during her undergraduate years, each semester she only had to study extremely hard for about one week before the final exams, and then she could get satisfying scores to finish the semester. However, after coming to America, Qi found that her academic performance was measured throughout the semester. In addition to final exams, American professors would also use quizzes, presentations, papers, and various forms of assignments to measure students' academic performance. The class participation that made her suffer a lot was also considered.

Because of the different classroom practices, teaching approaches, and assessment methods, all the interviewees experienced difficulties, especially in the first semester. Learning in English, since it was not their native language, further aggravated their burden. Both Huang and Qi said that they had difficulty participating in the discussions in class. They also felt overwhelmed by all sorts of academic tasks. "What I need to read within one week was even more than what I used to read in China in one month. I am not a slow reader, but all the reading is in English," Huang said. She had to spend much more time reading the same materials than her American classmates. It was common for both Qi and Huang to study until midnight, preparing for presentations, writing assignments or doing readings.

Like Qi and Huang, most interviewees chose to overcome the academic challenges by devoting a large amount of time and studying hard. Confucius believed that hard work is the determinant of success and advocated effortful learning (Tweed and Lehman, 2002). Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese students resort to effortful learning

methods when faced with academic challenges. Although all the interviewees had painful experiences of dealing with academic challenges, after one or two semesters, most of them began to realize the educational benefits of the American teaching and learning approaches.

At first, Qi was not accustomed to the discussion-dominated teaching styles and always felt anxious because she thought that the discussions in class were a waste of time. She would like to listen as much to the teachers' opinions and instructions as possible to acquire knowledge. However, after participating several times in the discussions, Qi changed her mind. She found that she could learn many interesting things and improve her oral English by swapping ideas with her classmates. In order to speak up in class, she had to overcome her fear of speaking in public. After about one academic year, Qi was able to participate in the discussions comfortably. She also obtained self-confidence and improved her oral English.

The different forms of academic tasks used to measure students' performance throughout the whole semester overwhelmed all the interviewees. On the other hand, the assessment methods also helped them to learn. The frequent quizzes gave Qi motivation for studying hard throughout the semester instead of being impelled to learn only in the final exam week. The "unconventional" assignments, such as presentations, helped her to improve her ability of expression. The group assignments improved her cooperative and communication abilities. Because she had to finish the academic tasks before the deadlines, Qi learned how to use her time effectively and balance her life and study. As a result, she gradually developed time-management ability. Having to face the heavy academic load and being chased by the deadlines gave Qi the ability of working under



pressure. Now Qi is working as an accountant in an America-funded firm in Chengdu. Equipped with the qualities she acquired from the experience of studying in America, she can effectively manage her work and cooperate with her colleagues. Because she used to deal with the stress of academic learning in America, she is now able to have an optimistic attitude towards the difficulties in her work.

In addition to the above-mentioned qualities and competences, most interviewees also acquire other positive educational benefits from the learning experiences. First, they are able to develop subject knowledge, professional skills and expertise via advanced teaching and research facilities. Many of Qi's professors used to be entrepreneurs or partners in top law firms. They chose to teach at universities after succeeding in careers. With such backgrounds, the professors have rich work experiences from having tackled various cases in their careers. In class, they would utilize the cases and mix them with textbook knowledge to teach their students. Because of such teaching methods, Qi was able to learn a lot of practical skills and improve her problem-solving abilities.

Now Qi is in charge of her company's financial affairs on the American side, and the expertise she has learned in America helps her a lot in her work. In addition to the professional skills, she is also able to communicate fluently with her American colleagues and supervisors in English. This will give her a better chance to get a promotion in the future. Qi attributes her current success in her career mostly to her experiences in America.

Students majoring in science and engineering can more easily notice the benefits of the advanced teaching and research facilities. The accessibility of advanced research

facilities and cutting-edge technology is a main reason for science and engineering students to study in American universities.

Like most chemistry doctoral students, Wang's academic progress largely depends on the process of his experiments. He praised the advanced research facilities and the accessibility of them at American universities. While in China, he was in a research group with more than twenty students. They had to share the limited amount of experimental equipment. In order to use the equipment, he had to make an appointment at least three days in advance. Sometimes, he had to go to other universities in order to use advanced equipment that was only available in some top-ranking schools. Under this circumstance, he proceeded slowly in his research. After coming to America, he is now in a group with only six students. Each of them has many chances to interact with the professor. The equipment here can meet most of his experimental demands, and he can use it at any time so that he can conduct the experiment and get the data smoothly. Because of the accessibility of advanced research facilities, Wang is able to develop his professional skills and proceed well in his research.

In addition to the acquisition of professional skills and expertise, some interviewees also developed independent-study abilities through the autonomy in study. Huang had a lot of writing assignments. Her instructors only gave the students a general direction or a wide scope of topics. Students had a lot of freedom in deciding the content of their papers. Most of the time, only relying on assigned readings to finish the writing assignments is far from enough. Huang needed to do a lot of additional readings and gather information from various sources. Because of the individual autonomy in study,



Huang began to know how to manage independent studies and gradually developed self-management ability.

Wang also benefits from the autonomy in study. Wang's professor only provides general directions or suggestions on his proposals but rarely gives him detailed instructions step by step. Although Wang was not accustomed to such style in the first semester, he then gradually became appreciative of the self-directedness and autonomy in doing research. He has freedom to choose projects. He evaluates each project to see if it is worth doing or if it interests him all by himself. Such freedom gives him a sense of "doing his own research" instead of "working as an assistant to help the professor to do his project." This sense gives him intrinsic motivation in doing research. The freedom also enables him to learn how to manage and plan his studies by himself as well as how to be responsible for his research and future.

Another benefit that some interviewees obtained from their American education is the development of critical-thinking ability and creativity. After coming to America, Wang found that, unlike Chinese learners, his professor and American co-workers in the laboratory never treat research literature published in academic journals as authoritative. Wang said that his professor "doubts anything unless his experiment confirms the results." Studying in such an academic environment, Wang gradually developed his own critical-thinking ability and does not see textbooks or research literature as the authorities on knowledge. He is also encouraged to explore new directions to solve research problems, and the above-mentioned freedom in research assists in the development of his creativity.

In a study of Chinese international students' academic stressors in the United States, one of the interviewees, a computer science student said, "students walk on the

earth when studying in China, while they fly in the sky in America” (Yan and Berliner, 2009). In China, students structure knowledge step by step under the guidance of their teachers, just like walking on the earth. Chinese education lays a solid foundation for them. When studying in America, they have more freedom, just like flying in the sky. Besides Wang, other interviewees majoring in science also appreciate the freedom in research, critical-thinking ability, and creativity they can develop in American universities. For students majoring in science, the freedom in research and the ability to explore unaccustomed directions is crucial to their academic success.

### **Growing by Overcoming Socio-Cultural Challenges**

In addition to the aforementioned academic challenges, Chinese students also encounter many nonacademic difficulties. In order to understand Chinese students’ difficulties in the U.S., I carried out a survey. The participants were fourteen Chinese international students at Indiana University South Bend. Most participants think that they encounter more challenges outside than inside the classroom. The interviewees’ experiences supported this result. In addition to academic adaptation, all the interviewees also encountered many difficulties in their nonacademic experiences.

The interviewees identified various difficulties in their nonacademic experiences. Some are short-term challenges like getting used to the small town’s inconvenient public transportation, acquiring a driver’s license, buying a car, finding accommodation off-campus, and getting familiar with the local community. These short-term problems may affect the students only in the first several months. Most students can solve these problems quickly after living in the new environment for a period of time.



Other challenges relating to cultural and social adaptation are long lasting. Some may affect students throughout their experience in the U.S. The differences between China and America are major sources of Chinese students' negative experiences (Wan, 1999). China and the United States are regarded as having the largest cultural distance (Samovar & Porter 1991). Since culture strongly influences individuals' thought and behavior (Brislin, Bochner & Lonner 1975), people from the two countries have different ways of living, different patterns of thinking, and different behavioral norms. To Chinese students, the U.S. is a country of great contrasts in many aspects. Because they are unfamiliar with American culture, they can hardly find common topics with local Americans, and so they are unable to carry out successful intercultural communication. Chinese and American students also prefer to spend their leisure time in different ways. As a result, it is difficult for Chinese students to make friends with Americans.

In my survey, eight of the participants responded that they regularly meet fewer than two Americans in non-school settings, and they did not have any American friends. Some interviewees had similar experiences. Huang, a graduate student majoring in public affairs, said that she rarely had much in-depth conversation with her American classmates and she only had some "hi-bye American friends." Each time she enters the classroom, she says hi to her American classmates and, then, before leaving, they say goodbye to each other. Huang finds it difficult to join her classmates' conversation. This is partially caused by language barriers. But, most of the time, she just does not know the topics they are talking about. For example, sometimes her American classmates would mention the names of some sports teams or local organizations that she had never heard of before. She

cannot get the punch line in a joke either. Huang describes, "I just feel like an idiot when sitting among the others who are all laughing because of a joke."

Wan used to be an international exchange student and studied in the U.S. for two years. She had similar experiences to Huang. Wan met many American peers both in and outside the classroom. However, when communicating with them, it was difficult to continue the conversations, especially in her first year. The main cause for the difficulty is the differences in culture. Wan met an America-born Chinese (ABC) girl while in the U.S. Although this ABC speaks fluent Mandarin, it was still hard for them to carry out meaningful conversation. Language is just a tool for communication, but what matters more is the communicators' perception and thinking (Bennett, 1998).

The majority of Wan's interaction with her American peers was constrained within the classroom because, after class, they had different ways of spending their leisure time. When her American classmates went to parties or clubs, Wan preferred staying at home and watching Chinese variety shows, which is her favorite pastime.

Because of the new cultural environment and the difficulty in making friends with local people, Chinese students are likely to experience negative emotions such as loneliness and homesickness. In order to alleviate the stresses of socio-cultural adaptation, some interviewees chose to make friends with other Chinese students.

Seeking assistance from friends from the same country helps newcomers overcome short-term problems. Influenced by the collectivism in Chinese culture, the Chinese believe that friends are valuable resources in people's lives, just like the old Chinese saying that people depend on their parents at home while relying on friends outside home. At some universities with a large Chinese international student population,



helping newcomers adapt to the new environment is a convention within the Chinese student community. Wang recalled that, before he had a car, every Saturday, his friend, Cai, gave him a ride to do grocery shopping. This lasted for one semester.

In addition to offering practical help, friends from the same culture also serve as emotional support for Chinese students who are suffering from socio-cultural adaptation. Huang said that she likes to stick with her Chinese friends. When chatting with them, she is able to escape from the endless sea of English that overwhelms her. Complaining to each other about the difficulties they encounter helps both Huang and her friends to relieve stress. In some important Chinese festivals such as the Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, they have a gathering, cooking Chinese food and chat. This alleviates their homesickness and loneliness.

Some scholars think that sticking with friends from the same culture hinders international students' process of integration into the host culture (Kim, 2003). But the interviewees' experience shows that making friends with other Chinese students in the U.S can also bring about long-lasting benefits that positively influence their future lives and careers.

When living abroad, individuals from the same country are more likely to become friends. There is also a better chance that these individuals have similar backgrounds or share the same interests. Thus, Chinese students can meet congenial friends while living and studying in the U.S. Wu was able to develop a genuine friendship with another Chinese student when studying at Indiana University South Bend. She said that being able to have such a friend makes her life more colorful, and she would like to maintain this friendship after graduation and even throughout life.

For Qi, meeting other Chinese students in the U.S. not only brought her some new friends, it also helped her to find her life companion. When studying at Loyola University Chicago, Qi met Li, who was also a graduate student there. After graduation, they went back to China together and then got married. For Qi, meeting her husband is the best gift from the experience of studying in America. This is much more valuable and affects her much more strongly than any other personal growth she has obtained from her two years studying and living in the U.S.

The friends they meet in the U.S. are also useful resources that benefit the students' future careers. The Chinese students majoring in accounting at Qi's school have a WeChat Group (WeChat is a messaging and calling app). In this group, they share recruitment information and interview tips and give suggestions on job hunting. When Qi was looking for a job, her Chinese peers in this group provided her a lot of useful information as well as emotional support.

Chen studied at the University of Southern California for three years. After getting a master's degree, he went back to China and found a job in an advertising agency in Beijing. Chen's experience in America brought him an expanded social network after returning to China that serves as a sustainable competitive advantage in his job. In his fast-paced job, he needs to deal with different types of clients. If the clients are also returnees from America, their cooperation is always more smoothly carried out. Chen said that the common experience of studying in America enables them to have sympathy with each other's ideas. The same experience also enables him to make friends with some congenial clients. It is rare for Chen to have any personal contact with his clients beyond business, but he is able to become friends with some clients who also have the experience



of living in southern California. In the collectivist-oriented Chinese society, interpersonal relationships are a key factor for people's career success (Yeung & Tung, 1996; Abramson & Ai, 1999). The expanded social network brings Chen more cooperation opportunities, and it is a sustainable competitive advantage in his career.

As shown by the aforementioned interviewees' experience, while in the U.S., friends from the same country can provide Chinese students with instrumental and emotional support. Seeking help from friends from the same country is the most effective method for newcomers to get familiar with the new environment. The experience of studying in the U.S. also provides Chinese students with an expanded social network that benefits the students' future careers.

Although Chinese students can benefit from making friends with those from the same country, sticking too much with Chinese friends hinders them from integrating with local people. For most interviewees, one of their main purposes of studying in America is to know other cultures and make friends with people from different cultural backgrounds. Some interviewees have tried to step out of their comfort zone and expose themselves to American culture and society. They have tried different methods to have more contact with American society. In the process of getting exposed to the American culture and society, the interviewees are able to gain a better understanding of this country and broaden their life experiences.

Wu has tried different things with the intention of knowing more about America. She hopes that it could help her to find some common topics with her American peers. Trying different things also broadens her life experiences. She has gone to Halloween parties twice. There she saw how American college students costumed themselves and

had fun with their friends. She also used to go to Chicago on St. Patrick's Day to see the dyeing of the Chicago River and the parades. After noticing that Americans talk a lot about sports, Wu tried to expose herself to America's sports culture. She began to watch football games and get to know the rules of this sport.

Wu's efforts do help her to find some topics to continue the conversations with her American classmates. However, developing meaningful friendships with them is still difficult. Her communication with Americans remains superficial because what she has learned is just a small portion of American culture and society. Although it is just a small portion, her efforts do help her to accumulate some knowledge of American culture and society. Now she knows how Americans celebrate their festivals. When sitting in the stadium among enthusiastic spectators and hearing their cheers, she gets a better understanding about America's sports culture from the feverish atmosphere.

The pervasiveness of the Internet enables people easily to access information about other cultures. From the Internet, people in China can get the same information as what Wu has experienced. However, knowing it from informational sources is different from personal experience. By watching the videos on the Internet, people can see how Americans dye the river green in Chicago; they can also watch American college football games, but they cannot feel the atmosphere of these events. Wu thinks that the atmosphere is one of the key elements of any culture-related events, and people can feel that atmosphere only by personally experiencing the events. Among all the benefits she has gained from studying in America, Wu is most appreciative of the chance to be exposed to American culture and society. Her experiences in the U.S., such as celebrating other culture's festivals and experiencing America's sports culture, have broadened her



life experiences. She would not be able to have these exciting experiences if she did not come to the U.S.

Another means the interviewees used to get to know America is to travel. The United States is a diverse country. It offers people all sorts of travel destination choices. People can choose New York City if they like cosmopolitan cities. They can go to California if they want to enjoy the sun and the beach. There are also many national parks where people can enjoy the natural landscapes and watch wildlife. Nowadays, a growing number of Chinese people are coming to travel in the U.S., but they have to endure the red tape at the visa application procedures and pay a large amount of money. For Chinese students, having a student visa is a boon for them. They can travel around the States freely during their stay. All the interviewees have the experience of traveling within the U.S. Some choose to drive to their destinations instead of taking public transportation. Traveling provides them with fun and pleasure. It broadens their life experiences and helps the students to see more of America instead of constraining themselves within the campus.

The aforementioned practices of participating in the celebration of local festival events and traveling around the States are typical ways that the interviewees used to come into contact with American culture and society. Because America has a heterogeneous population, during their contact with the environment outside the classroom, Chinese students are able to meet different people – both Americans and those from other countries. People from different cultures have their particular ideas and habits. By coming into contact with these people, Chinese students gain access to different cultures and heterogeneous opinions and attitudes. This is a benefit that only immigrant countries

like the U.S. can provide. Studying and living in such a country with great tolerance and diversity, Chinese students can learn about different cultures and gradually become more accepting of differences and diversities.

Wan is one of the interviewees who is aware of these changes. In her first year in America, Wan lived on campus and had three roommates: one German, one Canadian, and one Indian. Wan admitted that, many times, she was shocked by her roommates' living habits, attitudes, and values. The shock especially came from her Indian roommate. After living with them for a period of time, she gradually got to know that what she considered shocking was just common practice in other cultures. They were ways of living and thinking for people from other cultures. She gradually stopped judging the others' habits and attitudes and learned to respect them. She also learned some interesting culture about India from her roommate, such as Indian cuisine, and this eliminated her previous stereotype about that nation.

For Wan, such experience has changed both her life and career. After returning to China, Wan found herself more accepting of varieties and differences than before. To the things or individuals that people without overseas experiences would regard as "weird" or "unacceptable," Wan has a more "calm" reaction and treats them in a more friendly way. In her job, she feels comfortable cooperating with different partners because she has learned to accept and respect different attitudes and opinions.

In addition to becoming more accepting of differences and diversities, through contact with heterogeneous people, the interviewees also improved their communication skills, particularly their ability to communicate with people from other cultures.



According to the interviewees' experiences, the biggest obstacle for intercultural communication is not language barriers but unfamiliarity with other cultures. Language just serves as a tool for communication. Whether the communicators have empathy with each other's perspectives, thinking patterns, values and attitudes is the major determinant of communication (Bennett 1998). In the previous section about a better understanding and deeper appreciation of Chinese culture, I mentioned one example of the interviewees' unsuccessful interaction with Americans. When an American expressed her appreciation of Cheng's coat, Cheng replied in a Chinese way by rejecting the praise to show her humility that is valued in Chinese culture. However, such practice is confusing for Americans. In this example, the communicators' lack of knowledge about the other's values and thinking patterns was the main reason for the unhappy experience.

Like Cheng, other interviewees encountered unsuccessful interactions as well. On the other hand, failures and challenges also mean opportunities for self-improvement and learning new things. Qi regarded each interaction with Americans and international students from other countries as a valuable lesson. From these lessons, she learned to step out of her own cultural norms and got to know other cultures' thinking patterns, values and practices. As a result, she gradually developed abilities of communicating effectively with people from different countries.

This communication ability gave Qi an advantage in her career after she returned to China. She now works in a branch of an American firm in Chengdu and needs to report to the headquarters every month. So she still interacts a lot with Americans although she has returned to China. Because of two years studying and living experience in the U.S., Qi is familiar with American ways of working. Her knowledge of Americans' practices

helps to reduce friction between her colleagues and her, so she can smoothly carry out her work.

Some interviewees, like Wu and Qi, are more appreciative of their nonacademic experiences than their academic achievements. They have learned more from outside the classroom. Just as Chen said, no matter what a Chinese student majors in, he or she can certainly benefit a lot from contact with American society. To summarize the benefits, in America, students have opportunities to make congenial friends who are also from China. The friendships become treasures in their lives and competitive advantages in their careers. They can also come into contact with heterogeneous people and cultures. The encounter with complexity and diversity broadens their life experiences. They are able to learn about other cultures and become more accepting of diversities and differences. They also improve communication skills by interacting with heterogeneous people. Other destination countries for Chinese students' overseas education, such as Japan and European countries, are unlikely to bring about such benefits because of their relatively mono-cultural nature. However, the United States, as an immigrant country, can provide various cultural encounters for Chinese students and cultivate the intercultural competencies discussed above.

In the previous sections, I analyzed the interviewees' studying and living experiences in America. They encountered language barriers and both academic and nonacademic challenges, but, in the process of conquering these challenges, they were able to acquire competencies and achieve personal growth. For the interviewees who have returned to China, this growth and achievement has positively influenced their careers and lives. The interviewees' experiences are consistent with research findings



about the nature of intercultural experiences, which indicate that intercultural experiences are transitional experiences from which individuals can gain higher levels of personality development and personal expansion (Adler, 1975; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Gu & Scheweisfurth, 2015; Hao & Wen, 2016).

The information from the interviewees indicates that all of them have gained personal growth, but it also shows that the degree of their growth and development varies according to several factors. Both personal and situational factors matter.

### **Personal Factors Influencing the Degree of Growth**

The first personal factor is the interviewees' backgrounds and their previous lives in China. The interviewees are from China's different regions. They had different experiences before coming to the U.S. Eight of the interviewees are from China's first- or second-tier cities, and the others are from smaller cities or towns. No one is from rural areas. For most of the interviewees from big cities, it takes them less time to learn how to manage their lives and studies in the new environment, and thus they have a relatively easier adaptation experience. Their experiences in China can account for this phenomenon.

Zhu studied in an international high school in Shanghai before going to Purdue University. There he prepared for the SAT under the guidance of teachers from America and took international courses. Because of adequate preparation, he felt less shock than those attending ordinary high schools. The development in China is unbalanced. International high schools are mainly concentrated in big cities like Shanghai and Beijing because of these cities' social and economic advantages. On the other hand, students

from small towns are less likely to have intercultural encounters before going abroad. They accumulate knowledge of America mainly from the media and are more likely to have stereotypes about America. When exposed to the real world of America, they may have a higher level of shock than students from big cities.

When facing adaptation difficulties, most interviewees resort to friends from the same country. I suppose that the more they feel the difficulties and challenges, the more they tend to stick with Chinese friends, and thus they are less willing to come into contact with American society. Always staying in their comfort zone and refusing to interact with Americans, students can gain limited intercultural competencies such as understanding other cultures and improving their language abilities and communication skills.

On the other hand, students with lower levels of shock and an easier adaptation experience are more open to diversities and are willing to interact with American society and try new things. They would actively try to integrate into the local environment instead of sticking with friends from the same country, and thus they can gain a larger extent of personal growth and development.

From the interviewees' experiences, I conclude that if students were well prepared before going to America, they would have an easier adaptation experience. Such an adaptation process encourages them to actively interact with local people and integrate into local society, and so they can have a larger degree of personal development in intercultural competencies.

The second factor is the interviewees' majors. Their majors largely determine their contact in America. Students studying different majors have different encounters. Thus, what and how much they can learn from their experiences differ.



As a biochemistry doctoral student, Liu spends more than 10 hours in lab work every day. In the lab, except one colleague from Vietnam, all his co-workers, including his professor, are Chinese. Under this circumstance, he has very limited opportunities to get involved in local society or interact with Americans.

Liu's experience is typical for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) Chinese students. This group of students devotes a large amount of time in study and research. They do not have extra energy for social activities. Moreover, their reluctance to get involved in local society is unlikely to cause unpleasant consequences. Inadequate knowledge about American culture and society does not hinder their academic performance. For STEM students like Liu, their development is mainly in academic learning. They gain professional skills and expertise, and these academic benefits have been analyzed in the previous sections on academic challenges.

Unlike STEM students, those majoring in arts and social sciences interact with the world outside the classroom to a larger extent. How much they know about American culture and society largely determines their academic performance. For example, Zhou, a journalism undergraduate, sometimes needs to interview local Americans for her assignments and reports. She has many interactive encounters with Americans and is able to better understand local people and community. Thus, compared with STEM students, students majoring in arts and social sciences usually have a larger degree of personal growth in the intercultural competences analyzed in previous sections.

Another key factor influencing the degree and extent of personal growth is students' attitudes and determination. No matter what the students' previous experience in China was and what they study here, if they had a negative attitude toward the new

environment and are unwilling to change or interact with others, they could only improve and grow to a limited extent. In the U.S., nobody would force you to do anything. You are free to choose to stay in your comfort zone or actively try new things, assimilate new ideas, and practice your English and communication skills. To what degree and extent you would improve yourself depends entirely on you.

### **Situational Factors Influencing the Degree of Growth**

In addition to the personal factors, some situational factors also determine the degree of Chinese students' personal growth. The two main situational determinants are the type of universities and the universities' geographic locations within the U.S. Some universities have a large Chinese student population. These universities are usually famous and large ones with a good brand, and thus their prestige attracts lots of Chinese students every year. Some universities are relatively smaller ones and unknown to Chinese students and parents, and thus they have a smaller Chinese student population. Both types of universities have their specific characteristics and benefit students in different ways. In addition, whether the universities are located in rural areas, small towns, or big cities also influences students' intercultural encounters. They have respective advantages that provide students with different benefits and personal growth.

In the following section, based on the interviewees' experiences and information I gathered during my four years' stay in the U.S., I summarize the benefits and personal growth that Chinese students can gain from different schools. I hope it can serve as guidance for future students when they are choosing schools.



When studying in a university with a large Chinese student population like University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of Southern California, or Purdue University, the top three American universities with the most Chinese students, students can find many instrumental and emotional supports.

At Purdue University, each semester, Zhang would have at least one Chinese classmate no matter what courses she took. She said that the appearance of other Chinese students in the classroom gives her a sense of safety and security. Zhang lives with her Chinese friends. At least once a month, they have a gathering in their house with other Chinese students. Zhang enjoys this life. Chinese friends help make it easier for her to live in the new environment, and she experiences less homesickness.

Recently, universities with a large number of Chinese students are taking actions to better support Chinese students' lives there. On Purdue's campus, a Chinese student is able to taste authentic Chinese foods. In 2015, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign listed Mandarin as one of the official languages to broadcast football games (Mercer, 2015). The universities are making efforts to create an environment that is more beneficial for Chinese students.

Although attending such universities has the aforementioned advantages, these advantages also can weaken students' determination for social-cultural assimilation. In a video documenting Chinese students' lives at Purdue University, Professor Cai, Director of Purdue University China Center, indicated that the school's large Chinese student population hinders Chinese students' integration into American society. Purdue University has nearly 5000 Chinese students now. This is enough to form a community. Thus, there is a big enough environment for Chinese students to isolate themselves from

the outside world and survive and flourish in their own community (Cai 2015). However, such an environment is not favorable for Chinese students' contact with American society. Although they can gain educational benefits from these prestigious schools, their development in intercultural competences is inadequate.

On the other hand, students studying in universities with small Chinese student populations can encounter more intercultural interaction. With fewer Chinese friends around them, they have to interact with Americans. They are more likely to come into contact with American culture and society. As a result, compared with those staying within their own community, mainly speaking Chinese, these students with fewer Chinese friends around them may face more adaptation challenges such as loneliness. But they can also improve a lot in competencies like personal independence and intercultural communication abilities.

Qi received offers from three universities during her application process. She finally settled on Loyola University Chicago because it is small in scale and has fewer Chinese students than the other two large ones. She thought that, in this school, she would be able to have more contact with American society so that she could improve her English and learn American culture. Her experiences proved this to be true. Chinese students do not have gatherings very often. Sometimes Qi would go to American students' social activities. She was often the only Chinese student in a group for a project or assignment. Studying and living in such an environment, she quickly improved her English and communication skills and learned a lot about other cultures.

Studying in a school with many Chinese students, you may find that after flying more than thirteen hours and crossing the Pacific Ocean, you are meeting the same



people, speaking the same language, and living the same lives as in China. This is not most students' purpose for studying in America. On the other hand, smaller schools may provide a more favorable environment for intercultural interaction. Universities on a small scale do not equate with a boring life. They also have many appealing activities. For example, Indiana University South Bend has an Asian Heritage Festival and International Food Festival annually. Thus, in small schools, Chinese students can also experience heterogeneous people and cultures. They can gain as much personal growth as those studying at relatively famous and large universities.

In addition to the factor of university types, how Chinese students can benefit is also influenced by the schools' geographic locations. Both schools located in big cities and those in rural areas are appealing to Chinese students. Some of the interviewees' schools are located in big cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago; some are in rural areas. When choosing schools, they made different decisions depending on their own expectations.

When studying at universities located in big cities such as New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago, students can have a lot of fun during leisure time. What is more important, big cities provide many job and internship opportunities. When in Chicago, Qi was able to get a summer internship opportunity, through which she accumulated experience and many practical skills. This internship experience gave her an advantage when she was looking for a job. Employers are more likely to hire those with rich experiences. Big cities provide students with a broad stage for their career development. This is why students majoring in business often like to go to schools in big cities.

Universities in rural areas or small towns give students a completely different feeling and experience. Life may be prosaic in areas without crowds or skyscrapers. Chinese students jokingly call universities like University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Purdue University "Corn Field University." Upon arriving, some interviewees felt disappointed with the "desolate" scene there. They complained that shops close too early, they had no place to have fun during weekends, and there were few good restaurants.

Although living in the "corn fields" is boring, the quiet and serene environment is also suitable for study and research. Having few places to go to have fun, some students would go to study in libraries or do research in labs. Thus, research-oriented universities located in rural areas are always priorities for STEM Chinese students.

After a period of time, some students may begin to like the quiet and serene living environment. Many "corn field universities" are located in areas that are worth exploring. Studying at Purdue University, Zhang can watch beautiful scenes of fields under the setting sun and enjoy the four distinct seasons in West Lafayette, Indiana. Surrounded by beautiful scenery every day, she gradually developed an interest in photography. Sometimes she goes to a nearby farm with friends to spend a sunny day with lovely animals like alpaca. Students can also find entertainment in rural areas.

As you can see from the discussions above, both large universities and smaller ones with fewer Chinese students can provide educational and socio-cultural benefits. However, most Chinese have an obsession with schools' prestige. When choosing schools, they rely a lot on school rankings and prefer large universities with a good brand. Thus, the aforementioned Chinese student community appears at some schools like University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Purdue University. In addition to these



well-known large universities, the U.S. also has a multitude of other good schools.

Universities with fewer Chinese students and that are relatively unknown to the Chinese can also provide many educational and socio-cultural benefits. Chinese students and parents need to get rid of their bias and obsession with prestige and take a broader view when deciding which schools they would like to attend.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars (Kim & Ruben, 1988; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Hao & Wen 2016) argue that international students' experience in foreign countries is an adaptation and maturing process that leads to personal development and growth.

The interviewees' experiences in this paper are consistent with the scholars' argument.

The studying and living environment in America was alien to the interviewees who grew up in China. All of them encountered difficulties in terms of language, academic learning and socio-cultural adaptation. The educational and socio-cultural differences between China and America are the primary causes of the difficulties and challenges that Chinese students encounter in the U.S. Before coming to the U.S., if students were able to be aware of these differences and know that overcoming challenges is an inevitable process, they could psychologically prepare themselves. They could also linguistically and academically prepare themselves by attending international high schools in China just like Zhu did. Being adequately prepared, students would feel less shock after arriving.

The new environment caused many difficulties and challenges in the interviewees' lives and studies. But it also facilitated the interviewees' personal growth, which positively influenced their future careers and lives.

Although a variety of factors make a difference in terms of the degree of personal growth, generally speaking, studying in America has academically and socially benefited all the interviewees. They have developed professional knowledge, skills and expertise via American universities' advanced teaching and research facilities. An American education also fostered the interviewees' critical-thinking ability and creativity, which make up for the shortage in Chinese-style education. The multi-cultural environment in America gave the interviewees an opportunity to interact with people from different countries. In this process of intercultural interaction, they improved their English and communication abilities and gained a better understanding of other cultures.

None of the interviewees regret coming to study in the U.S. Their experience gives future students and their parents a general understanding about how studying and living in the U.S. can positively influence Chinese students' careers and lives. Rapid social and economic development in China brings about many opportunities to returnees from the U.S. The number of foreign-funded enterprises is growing (Liu, 2016). Domestic organizations in all sorts of fields are having more frequent communication with foreign organizations (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2016). The returnees can find many opportunities to put the knowledge and competencies they have gained in the U.S. to good use. Under this circumstance, the experience of studying and living in America still has a powerful influence on improving the students' prospects. Thus, the number of Chinese students pursuing higher education in the U.S. is continuing to grow.



The stories of the interviewees can give prospective students and their parents some guidance. By telling the stories of how previous students have benefited from their experience and informing them of possible difficulties and challenges, I hope that this paper can help Chinese students and their parents to make decisions on whether to go and help them to better prepare themselves before going.

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